

GIVING UP OUR LIVES

John 11:1-45

Intro: I finished a riveting book this past week. The book, *AMERICAN BUFFALO: In Search of a Lost Icon*, is full of incredible details about the history of the American Buffalo, and its near demise, its amazing recovery, its habitat, and a huge list of other things you never knew about the big brown beasts. Steven Rinella is a wonderful author who makes learning fun and one of the things he talked about is something that maybe you are familiar with. It is the fact that when the white men first arrived in the west in the early 1800s, there were 30 to 60 million buffalo. There were immense herds that blackened the prairie for as far as you could see. The buffalo was, in many ways, the lifeblood of the plains Indians as they provided food, tools, clothing, housing, weapons, and many, many other things for them. Their meat was a delicacy and if you ever go shopping at White Feather meats or at Rocking R Meats, you can find buffalo (they always call it bison) meat, and you will know what I mean when I say it's the best meat you'll find.

Starting in the 1860s, as the railroads began crisscrossing the United States and its western territories killing buffalo became a tool to subdue what the whites considered hostile Indian tribes. As a result the buffalo herds were systematically wiped out. By 1880, there were only a few hundred left. They were first shot to provide food for railroad workers, but soon it was discovered their hides made wonderful robes, bedding, shoes, and leather belts for industrial purposes. They were shot and skinned and left to rot. Even without thinking about the awful sight of buffalo carcasses covering the plains, one cannot imagine the incredible waste and horror of it all. After the big killing was done the wasted carcasses were scavenged carrion eaters or just left to rot away. The result of this was the plains were covered by a sea of white bones, bleached by the sun. So, the same people that thought it was a good idea to wipe out millions and millions of animals began looking for ways to utilize those skeletal remains – and they did. The bones were collected by the ton. (This is a pile of buffalo skulls) In fact it's estimated that **500,000 tons of bones** were collected and shipped for a variety of uses. (They would be piled along the railroad tracks for miles) Have you ever heard of bone china? Much American and English fine china had were made from porcelain that was 25 to 30% pulverized buffalo bones. Yes, people ate off of plates and drank out of teacups that were made from the bones of buffalo that had once roamed in Middle America. Some bones were used for heating. The plains had didn't have many trees and so bones made a good hot fire – but the smoke was very unpleasant so it wasn't preferred. Even today bone meal is still used for making fertilizer and also for processing sugar and flour and other baking aids. So in the 1880s and the 1890s, the buffalo bones which had covered the planes, were utilized for all of these purposes that I just mentioned to you.

Now, when you visualize those bones in your mind's eye, as they are spread out over the Kansas or Nebraska prairie, you can picture what Karen read about a little while ago from Ezekiel 37 where it says that Ezekiel was taken by the Spirit to a valley full of bones. With similar desolation that you can imagine from visualizing the American Plains covered with buffalo bones, Ezekiel looked at this and he knew that it wasn't buffalo – what he saw were the desiccated remains of the people of God. The same people who had walked away in rebellion. They were exiled, far from where they were supposed to be. But the word of the Lord to Ezekiel was the solid promise that the bones will live no matter how dry and dusty they are. Indeed, Ezekiel breathed and the Spirit of God flowed into them and those bones took on flesh and muscle and then the Spirit of God. Living and vital human beings came out of those dry, dead bones. No bone meal for them and no bone china for sure. They are living again and ready for service. His promise was "*Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.*" Ezekiel 37:14 (ESV) and his plan would surely come to fruition. This is because, for the people of God eternal life is the promise and the cemetery is not our end,

We're continuing our Lenten series entitled *GIVING IT UP* and today we're talking about giving up our lives. Don't worry, I'm not turning into Jim Jones – I'm talking about faith and surrender. In just 2 weeks, on Resurrection Day, otherwise known as Easter, we will be talking about *GIVING UP DEATH*. But here in this talk we are going to be talking about giving up our lives to Jesus who is the resurrection in life. Like that valley of dry bones, as we give our lives to him, God promises to fill us with life.

As we do this, we're going to look at John 11:1-45. Now, don't worry, I'm not going to read all those verses – in fact that's why I had you read them over the weekend, in preparation. I'm going to take three sections and pull out some truths of what we mean when we give up our lives.

Let's read. John 11:1-4 (Read)

We see here. . .

Death is not the end

- This is a very familiar passage that I have used numerous times here at ABC and in numerous funeral services. This is because there is much hope here making it an easy passage for me to preach. I'll draw on some of those truths that I've laid out before even as I take a slightly different tack for the fifth Sunday of Lent.
- So, Jesus gets word that his very good friend Lazarus from a dear family that consisted of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is very ill. Now, Jesus is about a day's travel to the east of Bethany where Lazarus lives so it probably took the messenger a day to get to him with the message in the first place, so his disciples are puzzled that he sat there for a couple days and didn't do anything and then he finally takes that day long walk to Bethany. Jesus waited, the disciples wondered, and Lazarus died. But through it all, God would be glorified. Lionel Whiston, in his study of the Book of John, *THROUGH THE EYES OF LOVE*, writes "*The final word is not death but the glory of God, and this Glory God shares with his Son.*"
- Here is a truth we need every day and all day long, for the Christ Follower, death is not the end. This is why there is so much hope and truth in the Psalm that says *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.* Psalm 116:15. The same God who has his eye on the sparrow, has his eye on us. As we give up our lives and surrender to him, he is glorified, and we are blessed.
- The account continues and we see Jesus waiting around for a couple days and then finally he stands up and dusts himself off and heads out for Bethany. As he does he has a curious thing to say, it's something like "*Lazarus has fallen asleep*". And his disciples are relieved to know that Lazarus was only sleeping rather than dead. So Jesus clarifies that Lazarus has actually died, and they wondered how God would be glorified through this. So, worried as they were about what kind of reception Jesus would receive, they follow him to Bethany.
- Let's read John 11:17-32. (Read)
- We see here that . . .

Jesus gives life that death can't touch

- Commentator Floyd Filson writes, "*Jesus is the resurrection and the life; he can raise the dead and he gives life that death cannot touch.*" The grieving sisters could not fathom this yet. Martha, who is the one that you would expect to come and greet Jesus, says to him "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that. Whatever you ask from God, God will give you.*" John 11:21-22. Her disappointment with Jesus is palpable. She can't understand why he took so much time to get to the family, but she also has great confidence in what he can do.
- "Lord, if you'd been here!" What Martha is forgetting and Mary too, is that Jesus WAS there. Many of us have cried a similar disappointed plea to God, "If only you'd been here!" But Lionel Whiston tell us the truth – He always is "here" wherever here is for us. We forget that he is with us, we have Jesus by his Holy Spirit. And his promise is what he told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life." We need to give up our lives to know that he is here. He's the way and he's the truth and he's the life. His promise that he is the resurrection and the life and he promises that *everyone who believes in me though he die yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die* John 11:25-26. And then he asks Martha. **Do you believe this?** And she does, but does she really? And let's ask this of ourselves, "Do I believe? Do I really believe that he's the resurrection and the life?" Believing this promise is a key element in giving up our lives.
- Finally, let's look at John 11:38-45 (Read)
- We need to. . .

Stop asking and start affirming

- Whiston, in his wonderful little book, suggests that we try A 30-day experiment. And here it is: "Stop asking God for anything. Instead of the prayer of petition, use the prayer of affirmation." And then he notes that the prayer of petition is not wrong, that, in fact, Jesus used it frequently. But we get into the habit of

using it exclusively, He rightly says that we're robbed of the joy and power of the prayer of affirmation. Instead of asking God to protect and guide our loved ones, we can affirm that it's already true. Instead of asking God to heal others or even ourselves, thank him that he's already doing it. To learn to pray with affirmation he suggests we start our prayers with something like "God, I thank you that. . ." or "My Father, I rejoice that. . ."

- This is what Jesus did. As he stood outside Lazarus's grave he began his prayer by saying, and this is my paraphrase, "You've already done this Father, and I know it, now show these people here so they know it too." That's what I mean when I talk about praying with expectancy. This is a God who's already done this. He's already provided us with eternal life. Yes, we may physically die but we will live eternally. That's the promise – when he assures us that he's the resurrection and the life. Jesus affirmed what God would do, and then he wasn't surprised when God did it. Lazarus came forth.

Conclusion: Let's give up our lives into the gentle care of the giver of life. Amen.